

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 506

CS 213 444

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TITLE Cultural Studies and the Limits of Self-Reflexivity.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; Cultural Influences; *Doctoral Programs; Educational Trends; *English Departments; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Ideology; Literary Criticism
IDENTIFIERS Historical Background

ABSTRACT

Among the changes that have characterized English studies over the past 25 years is an increase in self-reflection. The rise of various kinds of writing collectively labeled "theory" has influenced this move to scrutinize actions and motives. Composition studies have developed classroom strategies for asking students to reflect on their own writing and reading practices. With the advent of cultural studies, students are urged to identify previously hidden assumptions and structures, fostering a hermeneutic of suspicion. A challenge facing English departments is how to incorporate serious historical study without sacrificing the valuable advances of recent years. A strong movement beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries has accelerated, alarming those on the political right. Of real concern, however, is how students negotiate their graduate programs in the face of such numerous options and strong political debate. Some students are dealing with the situation by seizing on a self-reflexivity that minimizes historical facts. Departmental leaders must insist that cultural analysis requires erudition. One strategy for limiting a field of study is a doctoral examination consisting of an area chosen by the student together with a faculty committee. The committee insures that a study of the social construction of AIDS, for instance, should be historicized by considering earlier representations of the disease. The loss of historical memory is a very real danger for graduate students today, but history remains an inescapable resource in cultural studies.
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CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE LIMITS OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Among the many things which have characterized the great changes which have occurred in English studies over the past twenty-five years or so, one is certainly an increase in self-reflection. There are many kinds of self-reflexivity, of course, from the theoretical positioning which is now de rigeur at the outset of any seminar paper or dissertaion, to routine administrative structures which require faculty as well as students to explain and to some extent justify the work they do. To cite two examples from my own department, professors are asked to submit a written rationale for each graduate course which they propose to teach, rather than simply announcing that they intend to teach the Tennyson seminar once again, while doctoral students must define in some detail, and submit for approval, the project on which they propose to be examined prior to undertaking their dissertaion research. The rise of various kinds of writing which have been collectively labeled as "theory" has had something to do with this move to scrutinize what it is that we do, or want to do, or have done, before, during, and after we do it. But equally influential has been the movement within composition studies to found its classroom pedagogy on the development of various strategies for asking students to reflect on their own writing and reading practices. As my two colleagues must have

made clear, beginning teaching assistants in our department have no choice about whether or not they want to reflect--and reflect intensively--on what it is that they have set out to do. On the one hand they are asked, as apprentice teachers of writing, to understand the behavior of their students as a continuous process of attempting to "negotiate" social discourses. On the other hand, they are asked to begin to define themselves as professionals by thinking about the radically historical contingency of the discipline they have chosen to enter, of the fact that English has no stable meaning, no "essence," because it too is a social construction, and a relatively new one at that.

With the more recent advent of cultural studies, students are more than ever urged to see their task as one of bringing to light previously hidden, or unconscious assumptions and structures. Culture studies is not only an enterprise in which social critique is central, but it is one which views with suspicion the traditional disciplinary boundaries which had defined the ground on which older forms of social critique had taken place. At the extreme, and most often within the sphere of a partial reading of Foucault, all disciplinary knowledge itself may be held by students to be simply repressive--at least all disciplinary knowledge older than, or other than, the most up-to-date thinking in departments of English. As Director of Graduate Studies, I spend the customary amount of time listening to students complain about their programs, and regardless of whether they are for or against the hermeneutic of suspicion, they all seem to embrace its mode of thought. Some resist what I

have called the self-reflexivity of our program: "all this so-called openness isn't really open; it's more like a cult; you're trying to brainwash me." Others embrace it with a truly appalling zeal, writing letter after letter devoted to minute and ingenious deconstruction, and deferral, of the graduate regulations. Even a first-generation theorist like myself sometimes wants to join Nike and shout "Just do it!"

As much fun as it is to complain about complaining, however, what I'd like to do today is say a bit about just one of the challenges facing any department, such as ours, which would undertake to define a program in cultural studies. That challenge is how to incorporate serious historical study without sacrificing any of the invaluable advances of the past two decades. I don't need to remind you here of the growth throughout the 70's and 80's of courses in women's studies, film, literary theory, popular culture, minority literatures, and of course, composition theory, pedagogy, history of the discipline, to say nothing of the canonical revisions which transformed many traditional courses as well. With the appearance of cultural studies, the proliferation of valuable courses has become greater still. Our students want to take courses in Fine Arts, Philosophy, History and Philosophy of Science, Sociology, History, and students from those departments are in turn appearing in our seminar rooms. Culture studies has strongly accelerated this move out beyond the boundaries of a single discipline, and the bureaucratic structures of our PhD make such movement easily possible.

For those on the political right, this sudden explosion in what it is that we teach is viewed with alarm, and their answer is relatively simple: there is only so much room in the curriculum and what I have called "advances" are at best trivial and at worst destructive of social values, so let's clear them out and make some space for the Great Tradition again. But for those on the far left, the answer is also simple, though opposite: there is only so much room in the curriculum, and the Great Tradition has been little other than an instrument of domination, so let's clear it out and make space for more advances. The British attack on teaching Shakespeare in any form is one example of the latter position, as is the denigration of all older literature in some avant-garde departments. While faculty debate these questions, however, it is the students who must feel the pressure of trying to read professional documents ranging from departmental curricula to MLA convention programs, all of which seem to present a daunting array of subjects and knowledges. And they must do so while listening to a debate in which both sides seem to be in remarkable agreement that this is a dispute structured around a binary opposition, an either-or choice between incompatible items, whether we define those items as medieval literature vs. media studies, or aesthetics vs. politics. Faced with an argument that is framed by an imperative--"something has to go"--students are quite right to seek strategies to lighten their load.

It is this last point which interests me--not that students may well choose one side or another: they may--but that they also

hear, and must somehow respond to, the premises of the debate itself. The question here is what students learn not just from courses, but from programs, conferences, and even media accounts--that is, for example, how they use course A to understand course B, and use both to understand the demands of projects, examinations, dissertations, and, ultimately what work in English ought to look like. Please note that I am describing how students may negotiate a program by means of their reading of certain courses. This says nothing about what the instructors of those courses may or may not have intended, but it does say something quite interesting about how students may put two courses together and read a certain logic between them.

To return to my role as administrative listener for a moment, it seems clear that one way in which students have begun to deal with the perception that too much is being asked of them is to seize on the self-reflexivity which I described earlier, and make of it a world sufficient unto itself. Such a student might, for example, appropriate the emphasis in a composition seminar on classroom pedagogy, concluding that that emphasis authorizes a realm of endlessly recursive psychic probing, while at the same time minimizing the need to bring to the classroom any prior knowledge base. Thus, "why are you positioning me in the way you do?" becomes a good question for either student or teacher to ask, while "what do you know about book production in the second half of the nineteenth century?" is not felt to be a good question. However, the student may equally well come from a course in literary post-structuralism in which the study of

pedagogy is replaced by a critique of Enlightenment reason and an attack on the notion of Truth itself, and yet arrive at very much the same position with regard to what is a good question, and what is not.

But this is the point in my listening when I always have to break in to insist that any program in cultural studies must find a way to deal with the inescapable fact that cultural analysis requires erudition. If theoretical sophistication and sensitive self-reflexivity are essential to the enterprise, it is nevertheless the case that remaining within the boundaries of the classroom, endlessly negotiating one's own position, or that of a few classroom Others, is not cultural studies. The paper which dazzles in the theoretical facility of its windup only to flop when the actual pitch is delivered has become all too familiar. Let me emphasize again that there is a very real and understandable logic to the desire to stay entirely within the realm of theoretical maneuver, given the ever increasing demands on graduate students today. For those of us involved in program development, the question is how to design a curriculum which invites serious historical study without suggesting that it is impossibly difficult, somehow theoretically retrograde, or only available at the cost of sacrificing the hard-fought diversity of our new curricula.

Let me suggest just a couple of ways in which our PhD in cultural and critical studies attempts to do this. In lieu of the more traditional comprehensive examination in several pre-defined

areas, our doctoral students must, with the help of a 3 or 4 person faculty committee, design the area of work, called a project, on which they will be examined. This is what our Graduate Student Handbook says about the process:

The PhD project is an occasion to integrate various aspects of the changing disciplinary practices of English and to begin to define a broad area of inquiry for subsequent work. It is a historical and theoretical investigation of a topic held to be of long term significance for critical study. The project serves as the basis for each student's PhD exams. Ordinarily, it leads into the more detailed inquiry of a dissertation. . . .The proposal should define a program of historical research into the emergences and/or effects of the project topic. It should situate the project in relation to ongoing issues, problems, and debates in contemporary critical and cultural theory. It should, that is, briefly explain why its field of study should be constituted in this way.

Obviously, this process is a deeply reflexive one, asking students not only to define an area of intellectual work for themselves, but to reflect on, and articulate in writing, why that work should take the shape it does. But if this process is in this sense a theoretically self-reflexive one, it is at the same time, and from the outset, defined as historical as well. Not only is English characterized by the phrase "changing disciplinary practices," but the topic itself must be

historicized. In practice, that means defining the topic as "emerging" at some point, and then as having "effects" in a process which is ongoing, and so fundamentally historical.

One of the ways in which these words in a handbook become actual in the conduct of the program is when students submit their project proposals to a faculty oversight committee for approval. At that point the committee may suggest changes, and very often their suggestions have to do with ways to deepen the historical dimensions of a project. For example, a student recently proposed to undertake a study of the social construction of AIDS as it is currently being presented and received in the popular media. A good deal of serious work is being done on this topic now, and the committee was very supportive. In keeping with our understanding of what ought to be accomplished at this pre-dissertation stage in a student's work, however, the committee suggested that the student might want to historicize this very contemporary topic by some earlier instances of the social representation of disease. One trajectory might go from the 18th to the 20th centuries, following the very rich literary, and later filmic, representations of syphilis and tuberculosis. Extensive scholarly and critical work has been done on these two diseases, and each, like AIDS, has been involved in crucial ways with highly contested social representations of sexuality. Underlying this dialogue between student and faculty is the assumption that if cultural study is to be practiced within an English department, it should not simply be sociology without statistics. Rather, it should reflect our own comparative

advantage, so to speak, which is the analysis of texts as historical productions. That is, we are particularly well situated to understand the historical embeddedness of texts, the genealogies which constrain them, and their power to appropriate older forms for new purposes, and so to alter the expectations of the audiences which receive them.

I suggested earlier that the loss of historical memory is a very real danger for graduate students today, overburdened as they are by the demands of a changing profession, and caught between strident calls to choose X but not Y, or Y but not X. In addressing this problem, my department has rejected this kind of categorical thinking, which would organize a curriculum like a kitchen: composition in the crock by the sink (we use it every day); literary theory in the top drawer (where else?); film and popular culture in the shelf by the jello (awfully popular); and history at the back of the bottom cupboard behind the pizzelli iron we never use. Instead, we have attempted to rethink the work we do across categories. Our bureaucratic structures, particularly that of the PhD project proposal system, encourage this kind of rethinking beyond the old boundaries, and in many of our seminars, divisions among work in composition, literary theory, and literary history virtually disappear. Jean Carr's courses in historical literacy and 19th-century women's writing are exemplary of this attempt to think in historically responsible ways about issues of great current importance.

If we are sometimes tempted, Prufrock-like, to retreat into a cocoon of endless self-examination, because it just seems too difficult or too politically confusing to fit historical study into our new agendas, we should resist. History is far less valuable as simply another hoop to be jumped, than it is as a way of rethinking the present. The aim of our program is to do just that, and when one of our students begins to wonder what connection there might be between the cultural assumptions which had condemned a turn-of-the-century novelist to second-rate status, and the cultural assumptions surrounding the emergence of something called "basic writing" 60 years later, then we know that history is not a burden to our students, but an inescapable resource to them, as they invent the shape of future work in our discipline.